

3.5 Recreation

Introduction

The project area, which lies between the busy Lake Como Recreation Area and Lost Horse Creek canyon, receives moderate recreation use. The main type of recreation use of this area is dispersed recreation, meaning there are no developed recreation sites or designated trails. National Forest System Road (NFSR) 5621, which bisects the project area, connects two busy areas (Lake Como and Lost Horse). The area is easily accessible and is at a relatively low elevation, making this a popular area in the spring time and late in the fall.

The recreation analysis focuses on public health and safety, maintaining multiple use recreation opportunities, maintaining the visual integrity, esthetics, and natural beauty of the area while reducing the potential for high levels of tree mortality and creating a more resilient forest. The analysis identifies the existing recreation opportunities and discloses potential effects on recreation from the proposed management.

Summary of Effects

All action alternatives propose treatments that will have some short term effects on recreationists in terms of temporary displacement and visual and sound effects. Visitors may be temporarily displaced during road and area closures which may be implemented for public health and safety during timber harvest and prescribed burning activities. Visitors may see and hear activities associated with timber harvest and prescribed burning activities which may affect their recreation experience if the visitor is seeking quietness and solitude.

3.5.1 Overview of Issues Addressed

The primary issue for recreation is how project activities would affect the type of recreation opportunity and the quality of the recreation experience for the visitor. Components of timber harvest that may affect the recreation experience are temporary closures of roads and areas of the forest, increased log truck, logging equipment, and administrative traffic, smoke from prescribed burning activities, increase in dust on National Forest System Roads (NFSR), changes to scenery, and noise from:

- “ skidding and tree cutting
- “ log hauling, road and landing construction
- “ tracked-line machine trail and skid trail development
- “ rehabilitation of temporary roads, TLM and skid trails, and landings
- “ creation and rehabilitation of slash piles
- “ and prescribed burning activities.

3.5.2 Existing Condition of Affected Environment

Recreational uses in the Como Forest Health Project area consist mostly of dispersed uses such as recreational driving, hunting, hiking, berry picking, firewood gathering, viewing scenery and wildlife, horseback riding, mountain bike riding, ATV and snowmobile riding, cross-country skiing, shooting firearms, and camping in dispersed campsites.

Recreationists use the open road system to access the project area and the closed road system to pursue their recreation activity. Most of the road system is closed year-round except for NFSR 5621, NFSR 5623, and NFSR 62966. NFSR 5623 is open to all motorized use between June 15 and August 31. NFSR 62966 is open to ATVs and motorcycles between June 15 and August 31 but closed to highway vehicles year-round. NFSR 5621 is the only road in the project area open year-round. This road receives moderate to high use on weekends during the summer months and moderate use during hunting season in the fall. NFSR 5621 provides the only interpretive auto tour on the Bitterroot National Forest. The 7-mile drive through the heart of the Lick Creek Demonstration and research forest identifies 10 stops at interesting points. The tour starts on the south end of NFSR 5621 at the junction of NFSR 550 (Lake Como Recreation Area road) and ends at the junction with NFSR 429 (Lost Horse road). An interpretive brochure is available at the first stop and includes narratives and photographs of each stop. The Lost Horse road, NFSR 5621, and Lake Como road provide visitors with a nice, scenic loop drive.

There are a couple unauthorized off-highway vehicle routes within the project area. The trail that is of most concern is approximately 400' long and provides access to a series of roads that are closed to motorized use. To prevent further off-road use, barrier rocks were placed at the point where the trail leaves NFSR 5608 and travels cross-country up the hill. Additional rehabilitation is needed to reduce erosion and improve watershed quality.

There are no developed recreation sites within the project area. However, ten dispersed campsites receive moderate to high use during the summer and moderate use in the fall. A few old fire rings have not been used recently. The dispersed campsites provide an alternative camping area, and often act as overflow, to the busy Lake Como Recreation Area to the south. Four sites that are heavily used during the summer months are located along NFSR 5621. The other sites are off of NFSR 13289, NFSR 13290, and NFSR 62945 (which is closed to motorized use year-long). The dispersed campsites within this area are primitive sites and do not contain any developed facilities (such as picnic tables or fire rings, etc.). They are maintained in a natural state for those who prefer a more rustic experience than developed campgrounds.

Approximately 1.5 miles of designated Forest Service trail (trail number 502) is within the project area but there are not any trails within units. Trail number 502 starts at the Lake Como trailhead and follows the northern shore of Lake Como for 3 miles, to its terminus and interception of trail number 580 at the inlet of Lake Como. In Alternative 2, the southeastern boundary of harvest unit 8 borders the trail. In Alternatives 3 and 4, Unit 8 is a non-commercial thin/fuel treatment unit.

This area receives moderate to heavy use on the closed road system by horseback riders, and is gaining popularity with mountain bike riders and people walking. Unlike other areas on the forest, this area remains accessible late into the fall and is free of snow in late spring. This area is centrally located in the Bitterroot Valley and is easily accessible by maintained roads from the Lake Como Recreation Area and the Lost Horse corridor.

The area receives light snowmobile use due to the travel restrictions. NFSR 5621 is the only road in the project area open to winter motorized use. The project area is closed to all motorized use year-long. The Lost Horse road (at the northern project area boundary), is also open to snowmobiles and receives moderate use in the winter. The Bitterroot Ridgerunners Snowmobile Club is authorized to groom the Lost Horse road from the

junction with NFSR 5621, west to the Lost Horse Guard Station. The 2014 winter season is the first season that the club will be grooming the road. Winter recreationists park along the lower stretches of the Lost Horse road by the junction with NFSR 5621.

The Lake Como Triathlon is a one-day recreation event (usually in July) permitted by the Bitterroot National Forest. The running segment of the triathlon follows the 502 trail from the trailhead on the north side of the lake and ends on the 580 trail at the boat launch on the south side of the lake.

The southwestern boundary of the project area borders the northern boundary of Lake Como Recreation Area, which consists of developed campgrounds, trailheads, day use sites, and a rental cabin and pavilion. The recreation area is the most utilized developed recreation site on the Bitterroot National Forest. People come to the recreation area to partake in a wide variety of motorized and non-motorized recreation activities (hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, camping, boating, kayaking, swimming, mountain biking, fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, ice fishing, etc.). As the developed sites and the trails within the recreation area get crowded, people search for other areas to recreate, such as within the project area. To avoid conflict with other users, many of the horseback riders park in or near the recreation area but ride in the project area north of the recreation area. The Lake Como National Recreation Trail (trail no. 502) parallels the southern project area boundary for approximately 1.5 miles. Trail 502 is paved for ½ mile and provides benches and interpretive signs.

The National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) survey is a nation-wide survey intended to gather statistically sound data about who visits National Forests and what activities they partake in while visiting National Forests. Three rounds of NVUM have been conducted on the Bitterroot National Forest: October 2001-September 2002, October 2006-September 2007, and October 2011-September 2012. Data from the 2001 and 2006 NVUM surveys conducted on the Bitterroot National Forest was published in "The National Visitor Use Monitoring Results" document and updated November 2008 (USDA 2008). The most current data (from surveys conducted October 2011-September 2012) is not yet published.

The NVUM data revealed that most visitors to the Bitterroot National Forest are local and recreate within 50 miles of their home. The most common activities that visitors come to the Bitterroot National Forest for are hiking, walking, and hunting. Driving for pleasure is also a popular recreation activity. According to the 2006 NVUM survey results, approximately 58% of visitors interviewed participated in viewing wildlife, birds, fish, etc. and approximately 74% participated in viewing natural features (scenery). Although this data reflects the entire Bitterroot National Forest, it is observed that these same trends apply to this project area.

3.5.3 Regulatory Framework

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

NEPA requires integrated use of the natural and social sciences in all planning and decision making that affects the human environment. The human environment includes the natural and physical environment and the relationship of people to the environment (40 CFR 1508.14).

Bitterroot National Forest Plan Direction

The Bitterroot Forest Plan states, "Off road vehicle use will be controlled during critical periods on susceptible ranges such as high use winter range, spring range, and densely roaded fall range (FP III-9(1)). While this direction is clear and relevant to the proposed area this direction has been superseded by the 2001 Off-Highway Vehicle Record of Decision and Plan Amendment for Montana, North Dakota, and Portions of South Dakota which prohibits any off road vehicle travel throughout the project area. This decision restricts yearlong, wheeled motorized cross-country travel, where it is was not already restricted on lands administered by Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Motorized vehicles can use trails designated for motorized use. A Forest Plan Amendment and Special Order were completed for the Bitterroot National Forest and signs were placed across the forest by July 1, 2001.

Each Management Area (MA) denoted by the Forest Plan describes recreational goals and standards. The analysis area is located in Bitterroot Forest Plan MAs 1, 2, 3a, 3b, and 3c.

Forest Plan management standards for each MA are as follows:

- “ MA 1-Manage for recreation activities associated with roads and motorized equipment (FP III-3).
- “ MA 2-Manage for recreation activities associated with roads and motorized equipment (FP III-9). Off-road vehicle use will be controlled during critical periods on susceptible ranges such as high-use winter ranges, spring ranges, and densely roaded fall range.
- “ MA 3a-Manage to provide recreation opportunities associated with main access roads and fishing streams (FP III-16).
- “ MA 3b-Manage for activities associated with lakes and streams (FP III-22).
- “ MA 3c-Manage for recreation access to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and for opportunities associated with Lake Como (FP III-30)

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS)

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum is a land classification system of six management class categories, each being defined by its setting, the probable recreation experiences, and activities it affords. ROS is a management tool that assists planning for recreation opportunities. The six management classes are urban, rural, roaded natural, semi-primitive motorized, semi-primitive non-motorized, and primitive. Urban ROS class settings are characterized by high levels of human activity and by concentrated development. Levels of recreation use vary and can be extremely high or dense. Rural class settings recognize that the sights and sounds of human activity are evident, but less pronounced and less concentrated than in the urban setting. Roaded natural class is characterized by predominantly natural-appearing settings, with moderate sights and sounds of human activities and structures. Semi-primitive motorized and non-motorized classes are characterized by predominantly natural or natural-appearing landscapes. Primitive class settings are essentially unmodified natural environments (USDA 1986).

The four recreation management classes and the area they occupy in the Como Forest Health project area are:

“	Roaded Natural	3984 acres
“	Semi-primitive non-motorized	933 acres
“	Semi-primitive motorized	503 acres
“	Rural	244 acres

The existing condition in the Como Forest Health project area meets Forest Plan standards, and provides the desired distribution of recreation opportunities relative to the purpose and need for this project.

3.5.4 Environmental Consequences

3.5.4.1 Alternative 1 – No Action

Direct Effects

No changes are proposed in this alternative. There would be no timber harvest or thinning and associated activities like road building, log hauling, and prescribed fire. The recreation opportunity, quality, or experience of the forest visitor would not be affected. Recreationists would not be displaced by area or road closures. The recreationist would detect no changes from current conditions.

Indirect Effects

Under the No Action Alternative, the mountain pine beetle infestation would grow and ponderosa pine mortality would likely increase. Trees above 6 inch diameter breast height (DBH) are susceptible to mountain pine beetle infestation, which would result in an increase in dead trees and create hazards for recreationists. There may be an increase in opportunities, however, for firewood gathering due to high tree mortality.

Cumulative Effects

Measures have been taken to improve forest health and protect public health and safety within the Lake Como Recreation Area. In 2011 and 2012, trees were thinned from within the Lake Como Recreation Area to reduce the number of hazard trees and to improve stand resiliency against mountain pine beetle infestation. In conjunction with the thinning project, the remaining trees were sprayed with carbaryl and verbenone packets were hung on trees within the riparian areas. The Como Forest Health project borders the northern boundary of Lake Como Recreation Area. No action could increase the chance the pine beetle infestation would spread to the Lake Como Recreation Area and kill trees we are trying to retain. The additional tree mortality could lead to site closures and damage to infrastructure, and would increase the need to remove hazard trees, thereby increasing maintenance costs. Tree mortality and subsequent removal would also decrease privacy screening between campsites and shade in the developed areas. These changes would reduce the scenic integrity and quality of the recreation experience offered in the Como Recreation Area.

Increasing tree mortality may increase the potential for fire ignitions in the project area because of the number of people recreating in the area. A fire in the project area would threaten facilities in the Lake Como Recreation area and the Lost Horse area and the safety of people recreating in the area.

3.5.4.2 Alternative 2 – Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

The direct effects to recreationists will be temporary displacement and visual effects. Short-term effects include temporary closures of roads and areas that will affect those wanting to recreate on roads, in dispersed campsites, and in the general forest. Closures would be placed on a site-specific basis depending on where the harvest activity is taking place. Once the activity is completed in that area and it is safe to do so, the closure would be lifted and the area opened to the public.

Recreationists will be temporarily displaced during road and area closures associated with the logging and prescribed burning activities. Dispersed campsites in the project area may be temporarily closed due to area closures during logging and burning operations but there are multiple dispersed campsites within close proximity along Lost Horse road that can provide a similar recreation experience and developed campgrounds within the Lake Como Recreation Area that can be utilized. The dispersed campsites along Lost Horse road no. 429 may receive more use.

Area closures will temporarily displace those recreating in the general forest and on the closed roads (such as horseback riders, mountain bikers, hikers, hunters, etc.), however, there are other places on the forest that offer similar recreation opportunities. There may be an increase in use by horseback riders and mountain bikers on the Coyote Coulee trail system or the Rock Creek trail.

NFSR 5621 (which is open to motorized use yearlong) will remain open unless timber operations alongside the road warrant a temporary closure to protect public health and safety. NFSR 5623 may be temporarily closed during project activities in that area. Visitors recreating in the Lake Como Recreation Area and the Lost Horse creek corridor will encounter log trucks and higher levels of traffic during logging activities on the Lake Como road and the Lost Horse road. Visitors driving NFSR 5621 will also encounter log trucks and equipment. There may be short delays on the roads while trucks and equipment are coming and going. However, log haul will not occur on weekends or holidays when recreation use is highest, unless otherwise authorized.

The Lake Como National Recreation Trail No. 502 and Three Frogs campground may be temporarily closed during logging operations in Unit 8 to protect public health and safety. The Lake Como Triathlon is a half-day recreation event in which participants run around the lake, starting on the 502 trail. Logging operations in Unit 8 would be coordinated with this one-time event that typically occurs on the weekend to protect public health and safety.

Visitors to the Lake Como Recreation Area, particularly the northern sites (Three Frogs Campground, Lower Campground, picnic areas, beach, trailhead), will see equipment and hear logging operation noise when units 8, 16, and 59 are logged.

Evidence of activities associated with timber harvest will be visible immediately and for 3-5 years following the project completion. This includes temporary roads, excavated skid trails, slash or slash piles, and burning activities. All skid trails, temporary roads, and landings will be rehabilitated and closed. Tree stumps will be visible. Although the physical effects of the project will be immediately visible, after a few years, they will not be as obvious. Vegetation will cover the stumps, temporary roads and skid trails will be

grown in, the slash piles will be burned, etc., and the visual impacts will be minimal. This was evident after the Lake Como Recreation Area hazard tree removal project. The logging impacts on the ground were apparent immediately following that project. But after one year following project completion, the impacts were hardly noticeable. Visitors to the campgrounds commented that they could hardly tell there was a tree removal project in there. They also expressed their opinions about how the views of the lake and surrounding landscapes were better and how visually appealing the area is.

Visitors should expect to see resource management practices in this project area as it is not classified as a primitive ROS class. The majority of the project area (3,984 acres) is located within a roaded-natural recreation class. The roaded-natural class is characterized by predominantly natural-appearing settings, but evidence of human activities (timber harvest operations, roads, campgrounds, etc.) may be visible. The semi-primitive non-motorized recreation class (which is characterized as the most natural setting out of the classes in this project area) identifies that the presence of roads is tolerated, provided they are closed to public use (unless deemed as acceptable travelways for non-motorized), used infrequently for resource protection and management, and are visually appropriate for the physical setting (USDA 1986). This project does not conflict with any of the ROS class characteristics.

As Lake Como Recreation Area receives more use every year and the developed campgrounds fill up quickly, people look for other camp sites that are relatively close to the lake. Thus, the dispersed campsites off the NFSR 5621 road and the Lost Horse road receive moderate to heavy use. This project will reduce the number of hazard trees and improve forest health, which will provide safer areas to camp or recreate in.

The vegetation will be more open which may result in the potential for off-road travel. The project area will be monitored following project completion and areas will be blocked off as needed for resource protection.

There are forest roads within the project area that are currently closed to motorized use but will be used during timber sale operations. These roads receive a high amount of non-motorized use. This project will not change the travel management of the roads. Following logging operations, these roads will be placed back in storage. Stored roads that currently receive a lot of recreation use, specifically NSFR 62937, 62938, and 62963, will have the first 100 feet of the road recontoured, the culverts pulled, and the remaining road lengths scarified and seeded. Recreationists using these roads should have a recreation experience similar to the experiences they had prior to project implementation within a year of project completion.

Coordination with the snowmobile club will be needed to ensure safe parking if winter log haul occurs. Recreationists would need to be prepared to encounter log trucks and log trucks would need to accommodate winter recreationists.

NFSR 5621 is not maintained in the wintertime and the use on the road by full size vehicles in the wintertime declines due to icy and snowy road conditions. If timber operations warrant, plowing NFSR 5621 may increase recreational traffic on the road.

3.5.4.3 Alternative 3 -- No New Roads and Alternative 4 -- Wildlife/Visuals

Direct and Indirect Effects

Effects of Alternatives 3 and 4 will be similar to the effects of Alternative 2, except that visitors to the northern sites at Lake Como Recreation Area (Three Frogs Campground, Lower Campground, picnic areas, beach, trailhead) will see equipment and will hear noise associated with non-commercial thin operations in Unit 8 (as opposed to timber harvest operations in Alternative 2). There would be less disturbance from logging operations in Units 16 in Alternatives 3 and 4 because Unit 14 is not harvested in Alternative 3 and less of the Unit is harvested in Alternative 4 than in Alternative 2. Disturbance from the harvest of Unit 59 would be the same in Alternatives 2 and 4 but there would be no disturbance in Alternative 3 because the unit is not harvested.

The Lake Como National Recreation trail no. 502 and Three Frogs Campground would remain open during non-commercial thin operations in Unit 8.

Excavated skid trails, slash or slash piles, and burning activities will be visible immediately and for 3-5 years following project completion. All skid trails and landings will be rehabilitated and closed. Temporary roads (in Alternative 4) will also be visible immediately and for 3-5 years following the project. Temporary roads will be rehabilitated, which includes recontouring, slashing, fertilizing, and seeding.

Cumulative Effects Common to Alternatives 2, 3, and 4

Measures have been taken to improve forest health and protect public health and safety within the Lake Como Recreation Area. In 2011 and 2012, trees were thinned from within the Lake Como Recreation Area to reduce the number of hazard trees and to improve stand resiliency against mountain pine beetle infestation. In conjunction with the thinning project, the remaining trees were sprayed with carbaryl and verbenone packets were hung on trees within the riparian areas. This project borders the northern Lake Como Recreation Area boundary. The Como Forest Health project also improves stand resiliency to beetle infestations. The Como Forest Health project complements the treatments in the recreation area. The larger treatment area increases a larger buffer on the north side of the recreation area which will reduce the number of hazard trees within and around the developed recreation sites, maintain privacy screening between campsites, provide shade within developed sites, and protect the visual qualities of the area.

In 2010, the Bitterroot Climber's Coalition and the Bitterroot National Forest jointly installed a 3-panel information board and trash receptacles along the Lost Horse road, just before the junction with NFSR 5621. In 2013, a new vault outhouse was also installed. These projects are a result of the large amount of use that the Lost Horse corridor receives and the large amount of trash left behind in the dispersed campsites. By installing educational signs on the information board and providing trash receptacles and an outhouse, the sites have stayed clean and visitors are educated about Leave No Trace ethics and multiple use recreation ethics. The recreation use in the dispersed sites and areas in the Lost Horse corridor may increase due to the temporary displacement of visitors from the project area. If this happens, there will be an increase in use of the facilities (trash receptacles and outhouse), which may warrant more frequent trash removal and disposal and an additional pumping of the outhouse.

3.5.4.4 Compliance with Forest Plan and Other Relevant Laws,
Regulations, Policies and Plans

All alternatives comply with the Bitterroot National Forest Plan.